The Corps
of
Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers

A History of RCEME in 1st Canadian Infantry Division, Central Mediterranean Force, 19 November 1943 to 21 March 1945

By

Lieutenant Colonel A DeMaio, OBE

The RCEME Heritage Archives

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Editor's Note

This EME historical reprint was written by Lieutenant Colonel A DeMaio. It is relatively rare in that it includes the history of RCEME in Italy.

The text was scanned and OCR'd by Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) L.L. Hellemans.

Doug Knight
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A History of RCEME in 1 Canadian Infantry Division, Central Mediterranean Force 19 November 1943 to 21 March 1945

This is a brief record for the period starting 19 November 1943 when Major A DeMaio, Officer Commanding 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop, assumed command of RCEME 1 Canadian Division to replace Lieutenant Colonel J.K. Bradford who was evacuated to hospital due to illness. It will be divided into five phases, namely, Ortona, the Hitler Line, the Gothic Line, Crossing the Lamone River, and the departure from the Italian theatre to join the Canadian Army in France in March 1945.

Ortona

The division was resting and re-equipping in Campobasso when Lieutenant Colonel Ralston, Minister of Defence, and Lieutenant General HH Crerar, General Officer Commanding 1 Canadian Corps, paid a visit to our division, including RCEME.

The novelty of the invasion had worn off and we were requested to raise our standards of soldiering. CREME [Commander, Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers] inaugurated a campaign among the men to establish the attitude that RCEME, in addition to being tradesmen, were also combatant troops, hence the term soldier-tradesmen was inaugurated. Soldiering in the front line or in the rear was to be a reflection of the standard of our workmanship and services.

By the first of December, the 1st Division was placed under Command of 5 British Corps to cross the Sangro River and join battle at the Moro River and Ortona. Recovery vehicles took over static recovery posts from 78 (British) Division as they came out of the line. This was the beginning of the use of recovery posts established by the Eighth Army. It was at the Sangro River that the CREME loaned ten load-carrying vehicles to CRASC [Commander, Royal Canadian Army Service Corps] because the weather had taken out the bridges and left him with no means of supplying the forward troops north of the River. RCASC and RCEME always enjoyed such a spirit of cooperation.

Having completed the move from Campobasso via Termoli to Fossacesia, 2 and 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshops located themselves in olive groves on the north bank of the Sangro River on the Fossacesia-Lanciano lateral. They were soon joined by 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop, temporarily commanded by Captain Rose, who had come across country from the Pescolanciano sector with 3 Brigade Group where they had been holding the line. On 19 December, Captain E.C. King from 1 Canadian Tank Troops Workshop arrived to be acting major and command 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop.

Liaison with Associated Services

During the latter half of December several important meetings took place. One was with the ADOS [Assistant Director, Ordnance Services] to find a way to obtain spare parts and engines urgently required by the LADS and workshops. RCEME had felt that Ordnance was not giving the required service resulting in a lack of confidence and lessening cooperation.

Following this meeting, minutes, signed by both ADOS and CREME were distributed to both services in order to bury the hatchet and make it a common problem. This act was the beginning of a great spirit of cooperation; in one case 36 lorry loads of parts for the division were received at least two weeks in advance, at a time when the repair and workshop facilities were begging for parts to process heavy workloads.

The repair of wireless sets and relations with Signals were both improved as a result of a meeting with the Officer Commanding Signals, the Technical Maintenance Officer, and Captain MacRae, our Telecommunications Officer. In order to ensure that wireless sets would always be operative and up to specification standards, a system of constant inspections and an immediate repair service were

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established. The minutes of this meeting were similarly distributed to Signals and RCEME complaints on the repair work soon ceased. Signals brought the work in to the telecom section, a great deal of work was performed, and the curve of inspection levelled out at a high figure for both the refitting and the battle periods.

Telecom sections were brought forward into isolated and protected forward areas where they often worked with the signals maintenance sections. Location states and large RCEME signs were introduced to assist front line units to locate telecom services night and day.

The Assistant Provost Marshal and CREME held a meeting where it was decided that clearance of roads and movement of traffic was a joint Provost-RCEME responsibility. The joint effort immediately reduced congestion on those roads, which were deteriorating due to heavy two-way military traffic through mud and rain. It was often better to use the recovery crews to make a piece of road one way than hold up traffic by recovering vehicles which would flounder. The Provost road patrols were kept informed of the recovery posts for emergency calls.

Artillery Overhaul

It was at this time that the units were to cross the Moro River. RCEME assisted by helping to dismantle their 6-pounder anti-tank guns in preparation for manhandling these guns across the river. At the same time, meetings with the artillery LAD officers and an artillery officer established a common system of maintenance of all artillery equipment. The interest taken in artillery equipment soon showed that a very large program of overhaul would have to be started and maintained. This was due to the wear on the carriages resulting from the rough roads, and by the sand as they crossed the desert.

Caravans and Trailers

A new department came into being quite unobtrusively during this period. While repairs were being made to the Deputy Assistant and Quartermaster-General's caravan (Lieutenant-Colonel P. Gilbride) [the DA&QMG was the senior logistics staff officer in the division] it was decided to build him a new one because it would be more satisfactory. The new caravan was such a success that it was given to Major-General Vokes. The Caravan Department had thus been established.

In February 1944, Lieutenant-General Crerar's office caravan was the first of a series of twenty-five caravans and trailers that were built with the help of civilians. This department was set up so that it never interfered with RCEME service in the division but acted as a representative of RCEME workmanship and services.

Divisional Recovery Officer

During the battle for Casa Berardi and Ortona during Christmas week, the main effort was keeping the roads clear. It was here that CREME 2i/c, Major Bill Hunt, and Captain Martin commanding 1 Advanced Workshop Detachment (AWD) were on the roads night and day. This showed that a Division Recovery Officer was necessary to constantly patrol the roads in the division area. Captain "Red" Martin was the first Division Recovery Officer. These were duties in addition to his AWD work. The Division Recovery Officer became an accepted practice in 1 Division

CREME's Driver

Lance-Corporal Dolson, who became CREME's driver about this time, proved to be an excellent organizer of HQ RCEME personnel. His sense of humour went a long way to maintaining evenings of fun and laughter in his "Basingstoke" tent.

Enemy Strafing

Between Christmas and New Year, 1 Division HQ moved into an orange grove immediately beyond St. Vito, and 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop moved onto the top of the town away from the

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railway yards by the sea where various British troops and our own had been strafed by enemy planes that caused 22 casualties, of which nine died.

2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop in Ortona Front Line

This Christmas week, following the Ortona battle, was one of strong counter-battery shelling. 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop had been sent to review a site in Ortona, but Major Ramsay was pinned down with this review party and was forced to wait till the first week of January before his shop could get into the town. The first eleven repair jobs were their own knocked-out vehicles, but in all the time they were in Ortona during January, February and March, the only casualty was one other rank who had his hand scratched from shrapnel.

RCEME Services Organizational Adjustments

By mid-January the workshops were extremely busy repairing vehicles and armament. Esprit-de-corps and morale became contagious. The infantry and their commands knew the support they could get from RCEME service. The LADs and attached RCEME personnel were visited at this time and monthly thereafter. This personal interest in their personnel, their suggestions, and their problems by CREME 2i/c or Adjutant countered the cold, mud, and wind of the angry Adriatic winter weather. The LAD's RCEME personnel were kept up to strength from the workshop establishment. This became a necessary and standard practice that lasted throughout the war.

The battalion LAD's also started to keep a weekly record of the work they did. Uncompleted work was brought forward weekly. This served as a barometer of service and a measure of both preventive practices and unit maintenance.

The commanders saw this record once a week and thus every LAD officer saw his OC regularly. Sign posting of all RCEME locating and recovering posts by RCEME flags at this time facilitated locating services throughout the division. The idea of having a common system for all RCEME units resulted in greater efficiency.

Divisional Gun Shop Detachment

During the latter part of January the overhaul gun program had been started. Guns were being taken to each of the armament sections in the workshops, but much time was spent going and coming from their positions due to distance and congested roads. The quality of workmanship was frequently questioned by the artillery; spares and bronze bushings were in short supply and there was only a limited time to get the work done.

The standard of repair of replacement guns was not good. Major Hunt, Captain Martin and CREME finally decided to establish a division gun shop detachment, to be made up of the three armament sections and an administration section, to be commanded by Captain Martin and under command of HQ RCEME. It was established in St. Vito and, by the middle of February, it had cleared up many of the previous artillery problems. It was not disbanded until April 1945, a month before the war was over.

Captain Martin did a most excellent job in organizing this operation. Subsequently every gun was inspected and overhauled as required in the gun shop every three months. All replacement guns came first to the gun shop for inspection and repair on their way to field units. Later, each field regiment received an extra gun which enabled three guns to be in for repair at all times. Standards for "in" and "out" inspection were drawn up by Major Morgan, OC 1 Canadian Infantry Troops Workshop who, from then on, never received any more divisional guns for repair.

The three armament sections were maintained as separate administrative units to facilitate one armament section invariably going forward as a gun shop AWD to give immediate service to guns temporarily knocked out of action during a battle. The total downtime and road time saved was the chief selling point for a gun shop advance workshop detachment.

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First Line Maintenance by Units

By the beginning of March 1944, the division was well on its way to being refitted. The A&Q and CREME had agreed that a campaign for first line maintenance was essential, since a survey showed that the units were getting away from this basic practice. CREME, therefore, visited all brigade unit commanders and issued instructions to all RCEME personnel to play a vigorous part in re-establishing the Six M.T. Task System of Maintenance, the unit AB406 inspection. LAD's reported the progress in their respective units, and by June the responsibility for first line maintenance was placed fully with the units, while with the AB857 A & B inspections were carried out by RCEME. Brigades and units availed themselves of a series of lectures on mechanical transport (MT) and gun maintenance by RCEME officers and visits to workshops. Brigade schools took full advantage of this also. By the middle of June, after the Hitler Line battle, this unit maintenance inspectorate from Eighth Army made an inspection of the division over a period of several months.

Ad-Hoc RCEME School for Line Officers

At this period an MT maintenance school was set up for all divisional officers in the 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop lines with Captain Frank Adamson in charge. Senior officers, unit commanders, technical officers, and company commanders were given priority. Over 350 officers participated in a one-day course where each actually performed the six tasks on their own vehicles. This school contributed largely to the high standard of maintenance and reduced work load for LAD's and workshops.

Staff Changes

On 20 March, Major Bill Hunt, who had performed so splendidly as 2i/c at HQ during this period, assumed command of 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop and Major King became 2i/c CREME for a three-month tour of duty. Capt MacRae, who had contributed so much to telecom advancement in the field, left on 12 April to be Deputy Assistant Director of Mechanical Equipment (DADME) and acting major at HQ First Canadian Army.

Reinforcement Problems

The flow of reinforcements from the reinforcement battalion to workshop LADs and units was far from satisfactory. CREME arranged with second echelon to send Lieutenant J. Atwell to the reinforcement battalion to study and report his findings and recommendations, as well as clear up problems on site.

As a result of his survey it was arranged to send RCEME reinforcements for 1 Division to the workshop. CREME would then post suitable tradesmen into LAD and unit vacancies at once. Later increments were arranged for the workshops. This did much to improve the morale and maintain trained reinforcement personnel always available for immediate postings, while available to work during congested work periods. Lt Atwell reported to Colonel JW Bishop as soon as he arrived in April, and worked at Corps level, solving reinforcement problems for all of RCEME in Central Mediterranean Force.

Hitler Line

The division was in first class mechanical condition for the battle of the Hitler Line. The move into the Hitler Line from St. Vito was uninterrupted by breakdowns. All the guns were in complete overhaul. Time was taken for a RCEME church parade at Vinchiatura on the first Sunday in May. Major General Vokes read the lesson and later took the salute. This is when we first met our new Deputy Director Mechanical Engineering (DDME), Colonel JW Bishop. It was at this period - 15 May 1944 to be exact - that the RCEME Corps came into being.

After a secret move south to the Caserta area, the division thrust itself against the Hitler Line and broke it at Pontecorvo on 23 May.

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During this battle, the roads were mostly narrow cart roads and across open fields. Two AWDs and recovery posts with constant road patrols and a telecom section were all that was required in addition to the LADs to maintain forward services.

This tied in very well with the GOC's plan of minimum traffic on the roads and a limited number of vehicles forward. The workshops in one instance were dubbed the 90-mile snipers, but RCEME's job was always immediately after a battle. The workshops had turned out between 300 to 600 major repair jobs per month. At no time could they not cope with the work in hand.

Workshops During Quiet Periods

During slack periods, and this was invariably before and during battles, they re-equipped themselves, built trailers, kitchens, showers, and generally applied the latest ideas for the internal administration and welfare of the men. Trades testing of mechanical trades was, of course, going on all the time and from time to time the men made souvenirs for themselves out of enemy aluminum. On 23 May, CREME presented Major General Vokes with a napkin ring suitably engraved with the inscription "Pontecorvo - to Maj. Gen. Vokes from RCEME Services, 23 May 1944". This he greatly appreciated. I should have mentioned earlier that, while in the Caserta area, most of our boys visited Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii, and Naples. Sergeant Major Walter Beer of 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop was unfortunately killed by a mine on the day that authority arrived for his return to Canada. He had done a splendid job for the division in LAD's, firstly in 2 and lastly in 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop Not far from Frosinone just after the Hitler Line battle, Capt Cramb commanding the AWD lost his leg when his jeep struck a mine, but his driver was unhurt. On 6 June, as D-Day for the Normandy landings took place, we went into a rest period for 6 to 8 weeks at Peidmonte d'Alife.

Staff Changes

Major King was left to command 5 Canadian Armoured Troops Workshop, Major Bill Hunt came back to be 2i/c and Major Coleman came from HQ CREME Corps Troops to command 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop

It was CREME's policy to give as many of his officers as possible a tour of three to six months duty at HQ and to give all officers experience in LAD, vehicle, and gun work. Captain Hunter had gone to command 2 Brigade LAD from being Adjutant and Capt Bannerman was in 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop, then Captain Kirby had a two month tour as Adjutant after which Captain Rose had a short tour. Officers throughout the division had been changed, promotions were made and Lt Lockwood became a captain for the fine work he had done in commanding the gun shop. Lt-Col DeMaio on 1 July took leave to Egypt and Syria for 17 days in the army commander's plane.

On 20 July, Major Bill Hunt was promoted to DADME at HQ 1 Canadian Corps and Major Ramsay took over the 2i/c job from command of 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop. Captain Kirby had been made acting major to command 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop when Major Ted Graham left on 1 July to command the corps recovery company. On 20 July, Rose became acting major to command 2 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop. Lt Atwell was returned to the division and Captain Parker, who had done an excellent job in the 2 Light Anti-aircraft Workshop, was sent to second echelon to work on reinforcement problems, partly due to his ability to do the job for which his age gave him advantage, but which was against him for another winter in the field. Captain Bannerman then became Adjutant.

Refit and Rest Period

During this refit and rest period prior to the Gothic Line battles, everyone received his share of leave, sunshine and rest. The division was in sound mechanical shape, but vehicles kept rolling in for repair due to the pot-holed roads. RCEME on a Corps level held a sports day, after which one was held on a divisional level. Lt George Grant helped 1 Division carry away the high points for the division in all the sports events.

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The MT school, and rebuilding of jeeps and trailers taken from salvage, was the chief RCEME service. The Princess Louise Dragoon Guards Reconnaissance Regiment exchanged places with the Royal Canadian Dragoons in 5 Division. The Saskatchewan Light Infantry received an LAD in their new war establishment.

Gothic Line

The first week of August 1944 found the division preparing to move. By the middle of month, we were in the Spoleto-Foligno plains on a top secret move with 1 Canadian Corps. The division joined battle with the enemy in and about the southern approaches to Florence for 48 hours, and then made a planned retirement to south of Perugia where it waited till 25 August to move to Jesi and join battle at the Gothic Line. This led to the fall of Rimini.

After the fall of Rimini, the workshops soon established themselves with 2 and 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop in Cattolica, and the Caravan Department with 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop between Riccioni and Rimini, and the Gun Shop, first in Riccioni and then in Cattolica. The division went into rest for two weeks and then proceeded to Cesena and across the Savio River, an action which took only ten days during the rainy weather of mid-October. The Gun Shop and AWDs were brought forward but this proved a bad move for the Gun Shop. The rain and muddy weather delayed the gun overhaul program for two weeks. By the end of October, the division returned to the Cattolica Riccioni area for a month, and RCEME personnel took advantage of another opportunity to catch up on leaves to Rome and Florence.

Riccioni Dinner

It was during October that HQ RCEME held a senior RCEME officers' dinner for the whole RCEME Corps at Riccioni. The dinner was a great success with practically all majors and senior officers present except the armoured brigade officers who were too far distant. The highlight of the evening was the Italian concert party which Captain Little and Captain Martin had formed in the area of Loretto and Nacerata. This party was such a success that it toured first RCEME then RCASC and then the division and 5 Division. Captain Martin was a very popular master of ceremonies.

On 10 November, Major General Vokes left the division and RCEME presented him with a dinner gong consisting of an Eighth Army shield superimposed on a copper plate of Italy and Sicily with the badges of all the arms and services under his command. The gong proper consisted of 17-pounder,25-pounder, and 6-pounder shell casings cut to the correct tonal lengths on the advice of the Musical Director of Pescara.

Crossing the Lamone River

On 28 November 1944, the division commanded by Brigadier Desmond Smith crossed the Senio River, passed Russi and held the Laroone River Line till they crossed it and Canale Navilglio.

A distinct contribution was made by Captain Olafson and Armament Quartermaster Sergeant Houghtaling in developing, producing and delivering the Olafson Foot Bridge, used so successfully in the crossing of the Lamone River and Canale Naviglio. The bridge was made of 7 mil tubing in 15 foot sections that could be coupled together to cross a 60 foot span, and each 15-foot section could be manhandled. Captain Martin ably assisted the bridge company composed of some 45 personnel and all the welding equipment available from 15 different units in the division. The bridges were built in record time, one for each battalion. It is an example of the capacity of RCEME to tackle any job, and its ability to organize and work with others in the division for the common cause. It is the spirit so prominent in RCEME 1 Canadian Division - that of the soldier-tradesman.

Christmas 1944

Christmas and New Year were spent on the Lamone River. Two workshops were finally brought forward. 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop went to Russi from Cesenatica where it was heavily

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shelled, along with the supply point and HQ of the division, from the end of December to mid-January. This necessitated moving 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop to Ravenna where 3 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop had already located. Major McEwen assumed command of 1 Canadian Infantry Brigade Workshop after mid-December when Major Coleman went to the UK on a gun course. Much work was done in this period, but the workshops arranged to have their best Christmas dinners at no cost to production. Major Stetham had arrived from 1 Canadian Tank Troops Workshop to be 2i/c and Major Ramsay went to command the Tank Troops Workshop in Florence.

Departure from Italy

In the latter part of January 1945, General Mark Clark of the US Army visited the division. The boys again caught up on their leaves. In February and March the division received many new vehicles and recce parties started off for ports of embarkation leading to France.

The division moved to below Ancona. By the beginning of April it found itself in Belgium, where it joined the Canadian Army for its thrust into Holland, and to celebrate the end of the war together on 7 May 1945.

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